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THE COMIC ELEMENT IN CHRISTOPHER FRY

by

FRANCES THERESE ZENDER

A.B. Clarke College, 1951

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Approved by:

Wesley M. Gilbert  
Chairman, Board of Examiners

Ellis Walden  
Dean, Graduate School

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For V. W. and Frances Ann Zender

## Preface

This is an analysis of the comic element in the plays of Christopher Fry studied in the light of the principles for comedy presented by the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, in his essay, "Laughter." By analyzing the comic element in the works of Christopher Fry in relation to the standards presented in a recognized critical study it is intended to establish the quality of the comedy of Fry. Indicating the diverse views is intended as a clarification of the unique quality of the comedy of Fry.

Each of the first seven chapters contains an analysis of Bergson's theories regarding comedy, followed by a discussion of the application of these theories to the comic element in the plays of Christopher Fry. Fry's ideas regarding the nature of comedy as stated by him in articles and speeches are compared to Bergson's ideas regarding the comic in general. Bergson's explanation of the comic element in forms is applied to the plays of Fry to determine in what areas they agree and the significance of the disagreements. Qualities of the comic element in movement are discussed according to Bergson's ideas and related to Fry's indication of the comic in movement through dialogue. Bergson's discussion of the expansive force of the comic is considered, and Fry's practices regarding these principles are presented. The comic element in situations as analyzed by Bergson is contrasted with Fry's use of situation to create a climate for intellectual climax. Bergson's ideas as to what elements create the comic in words are outlined. Examples from the plays of Fry are presented to indicate Fry's use of these

principles. Fry's own sense of the comic created by words is suggested. The means of achieving the comic in character as evolved by Bergson are considered. Fry's application of these means and his special consideration of the comic character is discovered in his plays.

Chapter eight indicates some of the influences on the comic element in Fry from Shakespeare, Congreve, and Shaw. A study of Fry's use of comedy to present themes usually relegated to tragedy or drama is contained in chapter nine.

A consideration of the nature of the agreement between the principles of Bergson and the comedy of Fry, and a suggestion of what qualities of Fry's comedy is unique concludes the work.

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## Chapter I

### The Comic in General

Comedy for Christopher Fry "is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith. It believes in a universal cause for delight, even though knowledge of the cause is always twitched away from under us.... In tragedy, every moment is eternity; in comedy eternity is a moment.... Joy (of a kind) has been all on the devil's side, and one of the necessities of our time is to redeem it...."<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson, to whom life is an "elan vital"<sup>2</sup> (vital impulse), not to be grasped by the reason alone, writes: "the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness. It dreams...but it conjures up in its dreams visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group. Can it then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination?"<sup>3</sup>

Although Bergson began to formulate his essay "Laughter" twenty-three years before Christopher Fry was born, the principles he establishes in this essay may be used to illuminate and crystallize many of the ideas stated by Fry in critical articles and speeches and applied by him in his verse drama.

In describing the nature and intent of his comedies, Fry has said that "Comedy is not a drama with the addition of laughs. It is a world of its own, and when we leave it again, it can have given to the world of action we rejoin something of a new cast."<sup>4</sup> Laughter, for him, is not a false face, but a truth speaking clearly of good which comedy endeavors

to maintain.<sup>5</sup> He decries the fact that the most insistent faith has been faith in self-destructive materialism, a consequence of which has been to term that literature as naive which does not "mark and remark our poverty and doom."<sup>6</sup> He speaks further of laughter as a mystery of the flesh, which indicates the presence in man of something other than flesh, which, though dumb, expresses itself in a voluble way.<sup>7</sup> As in tragedy, man struggles against the life of his animal nature; in comedy, he laughs, knowing that part of that nature is essentially spiritual.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there are elements of tragedy in Fry's comedies. The tragic factor is found not in the sense of foreboding danger but as substance that incurs salvation as well as sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> In writing his comedies Fry thinks of them first as tragedies, for if his characters lacked the basic requirements for tragedy, the comedy that is characteristic of Fry would be impossible. In order to make the transition from tragedy to comedy, the characters have "to unmortify themselves: to affirm life and assimilate death and persevere in joy. Their hearts must be as determined as the phoenix; what burns must also light and renew: not by a vulnerable optimism but by a hard-won maturity of delight, by the intuition of comedy, an active patience declaring the solvency of good."<sup>10</sup>

In writing of the comic in general, Bergson disclaims any attempt to limit the comic spirit by definition, for it is, according to him, a living thing. It is possible then, to achieve an acquaintance with this comic spirit, but an acquaintance of this type must be a result of intimacy rather than by encasing it with abstract definition. In his section on the comic in general he nevertheless posits three requirements: "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is

strictly human." Bergson explains the necessity of the human element in the comic. Referring to man as "an animal which laughs," he adds that the human quality is also the subject for laughter. Although a lifeless object, a plant, or an animal may induce the comic, the dependence on the recognition by a human of the likeness to humanity in these objects or creatures is the source of the laughter.<sup>11</sup>

Bergson's second description of a quality of humor is that it is accompanied by the "absence of feeling."<sup>12</sup> Emotion is laughter's greatest foe. It is not impossible to laugh at a person for whom we feel pity or affection, but for that moment of laughter we must divorce ourselves from the pity or affection we feel for that person. Highly emotional souls neither recognize nor appreciate laughter; highly intellectual people who are able to achieve a disinterested view of the drama of life may lack tears but understand laughter. The "anesthesia of the heart"<sup>13</sup> that is required for laughter must not be mistaken for isolation of the intelligence, for laughter needs an echo. This leads to the third quality of laughter: "It must have a social significance."<sup>14</sup> There must be a feeling of belonging in a group and to a group for laughter to result. In summary, Bergson writes, "The comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men will concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence."<sup>15</sup>

Fry would agree with Bergson's dictum that comedy belongs to that which is human. It is apparent in his writings. His comedy is based on the strictly human and while he "does not laugh at man--he laughs because he is a man and likes being one."<sup>16</sup> His subject matter always concerns those within the human pale. He states that the "last word on

man is very far from being spoken. There is always something new under the sun, because the mystery never ages. Our difficulty is to be alive to the newness, to see through the windows which are so steamed over with our daily breath, to be able to be old and new at one and the same time."<sup>17</sup>

A laughter that is dependent on an absence of feeling is alien to Fry. His is a laughter of gladness, love, despair, hope and finally of joy. He does not seek detachment of the emotions but the full play of emotion and intelligence to look at life as the "real and most miraculous miracle of all,"<sup>18</sup> and having looked, to laugh. The comic faith of Fry is based on the realization that "there is an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light: either here or hereafter, in or out of time: where our tragic fate finds itself with perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in. And comedy senses and reaches out to this experience. It says, in effect, that groaning though we may be, we move in the figure of a dance, and so moving, we trace the outline of the mystery."<sup>19</sup> The surface reality man has made for himself by two million years of getting used to it is not the reality Fry espouses in his plays. The playwright is an explorer, says Fry. He is delving for the truth of the human creature, whether he explores through comedy or tragedy, his object is still truth because "over and above the drama of his actions and conflicts and everyday predicaments is the fundamental drama of his ever existing at all."<sup>20</sup>

Although both Bergson and Fry have a somewhat intuitive approach to life, it is possible that Bergson in his analysis of what makes for laughter has found in the idea that laughter is divorced from the emotions a premise that might be defended syllogistically; however, if carried into the realm of the syllogism, it is also possible that

the logic might fall into fallacy in attempting to claim that a human could act or react on an intellectual plane that would be without emotional implication. It is possible that Fry in this matter has a more realistic approach.

Laughter as dependent on a view of man as a social being is consistent with Fry's sense of the comic. Although he does not follow the traditional concept of social comedy as intended to ridicule vice and folly, thereby maintaining the established, accepted norm over the individual's conscious deviation from it, he does make effective use of it. He turns his laughter against the degeneration of the traditional view to the point where it includes the ridicule of virtue and idealism. He intends to make worldly wisdom ridiculous, to equate joy with the spiritual, the idealistic. That sense of reality that can be gleaned from the newspaper makes for despair and stifles the spirit. Fry would have his social being look at himself and his society with a fresh perspective. The resultant theater would be what he thinks entertainment should be, a holiday, not a photographic likeness of a miserable world. What he intends is not escapism or fantasy. It is reality itself viewed with a newness that is able to ascertain and catch the brief miracle of living fully for an instant at a time.

Two further factors introduced by Bergson in his approach to the comic in general are absentmindedness and a kind of mechanical inelasticity found in a human being who, by nature, should be able to change, to adapt to situations as the need occurs. When the mind is perpetually absent, whether it dreams of the past or of the future, the person loses touch with conventional reality and the comic is intrinsic in his character. One who is to this extent absentminded may become wildly

enthusiastic about his particular dream. Again, the absentminded may embody a distortion of character, a vice which is so much a part of him that he is not conscious of it as vice. Mechanical inelasticity produces humor because it denies the two forces, tension and elasticity which life calls for. A deficiency, imbalance, or lack of these forces in the body, results in sickness; in the mind, in mental deficiency; in the character, in an inability to meet the demands of social living. Because any deviation from the accepted social norm can result in a new center of society, the established society will suspect any indication of inelasticity of mind, character, or body. Since it is often impossible for society to control this inelasticity in any material way, the method of control used is of the essence of society: a social gesture. In this case, laughter as a social gesture intends to correct, and as such, follows a didactic aim of improvement as opposed to a solely esthetic or self sufficient aim. The aim of society is to promote the universal approach to the norm of elasticity and sociability according to its current view of these elements. In this light rigidity or mechanical inelasticity is the comic; laughter is the corrective resultant from the self-preservation instinct of the social group.

Bergson clearly indicates that this is not intended as the definitive formula for the comic as it is a workable explanation for only that part of the comic which exists in the realm of the theoretical. His term for it is the "leitmotiv," a recurrent theme, which is to pervade the various areas of the discussion, not always in the sense of a major component, but ever present as a contributory factor.

Fry, with his "profound belief in the individual as the authentic pivot of existence,"<sup>21</sup> presents many examples of individual refusal to

accept the established social norm. It is true that he uses John Donne's and Thomas Merton's theme, no man is an island, in at least three of his plays (The Firstborn, Thor, With Angels, and Venus Observed), but his characters' union with society in no way destroys their innate individuality. With humor, Fry "portrays a somewhat simplified and distorted individual, with a mania peculiar to himself."<sup>22</sup> His characters attempt to solve the problem of loneliness which seems to be an inevitable consequence of the individuality that is theirs through these various manias. The viciousness of the circle is evident in the fact that each mania is in turn so atypical. Nor is Fry primarily didactic. "The Irish playwright Synge once remarked that 'the infancy and decay of the drama tend to be didactic,' but that great and gay comedies 'can no more go out of fashion than the blackberries on the hedges.'" Christopher Fry is a man for picking blackberries, and he will probably do more for mankind by filling his basket than by donning the cassock and surplice."<sup>23</sup>

Fry's laughter appears to turn what force of corrective intent it embodies, not at the rigid and inelastic individual, but at the rigid and inelastic society. He also reapproaches the solely esthetic laughter. Thomas Mendip, in The Lady's not for Burning,<sup>24</sup> says that we should laugh

For the reason of laughter, since laughter is surely  
The surest touch of genius in creation.  
Would you ever have thought of it, I ask you,  
If you had been making man, stuffing him full  
Of such hopping greeds and passions that he has  
To blow himself to pieces as often as he  
Conveniently can manage it---would it also  
Have occurred to you to make him burst himself  
With such a phenomenon as cachinnation?  
That same laughter, madam is an irrelevancy  
Which almost amounts to revelation. (II.)



## Chapter II

### The Comic Element in Forms

Bergson presents a careful analysis of those contributory factors which he feels make for the comic "physiognomy."<sup>1</sup> The Platonic idea that the appearance of a person reflects his inner reality is suggested in the second part of Bergson's essay. If his requirement of deadening the heart for the instant of laughter is retained, a person with a comic physiognomy becomes a comic character. There are, however, restrictive conditions. The transition from the deformed to the ridiculous is dependent on the condition that the deformity be such that a normally built person could achieve the appearance of the deformity through mime. In this way, one of the original conditions, that of rigidity, is brought into play. The deformed person, viewed unemotionally, is one who has maintained a certain rigidity to the extent that he is unable to be elastic. Hence, an expression is comic if it mimics a rigidity which is contrary to natural mobility. Bergson further suggests the Platonic attitude by stating that "the person's whole moral life has crystallized into this particular cast of features."<sup>2</sup> The mechanical inelasticity which engulfs the personality would, on the simplest level, transmit it to the world in the physiognomy of one perpetually crying or laughing. Returning to the basic notion of absentmindedness as a cause for laughter, a person so fundamentally absentminded as to be trapped by habit into such complete automatism that he presents a fixed expression may be said to have a comic physiognomy.

Caricature is a result of locating in a face or a body a tendency toward distortion and exaggerating it along the lines which already exist. In order for caricature to be comic it must be apparent that the magnification is a means to reveal distortions which might otherwise pass unnoticed. Caricature may be something superficial; that is, the distortion may be magnified by the artist in a painting or by use of cosmetics. It may also be something natural in which case the distortion is apparent to all and has no need of magnification.

Bergson concludes this part of his essay with a discussion of the relationship between body and soul. In every human form the imagination of man is able to observe the soul at work trying to shape the material of the body into a graceful, mobile being. Matter in turn is inert and seeks to resist the resilience of the soul. It would mechanize the person through habit. The comic physiognomy results, therefore, when the intellect and will are controlled by habit, automatically, to the extent that the outward appearance becomes rigid. Where gracefulness should be found, rigidity is present.

In attempting to relate or apply the principle of the comic physiognomy to the plays of Christopher Fry, the immediate problem is that Fry does not describe the physical appearance of his characters within or without the text. It is seldom that he even indicates the age of the characters except through relationships. There is the intimation that "the weaker and stupider are distorted or paralyzed by the social patterns of their own time, while the individuals fight their way through, onto something like a permanent level of values."<sup>3</sup> The distortion, caricature, or rigidity of these weaker and stupider people in the nature of a comic physiognomy, is not detailed by Fry in his plays.

When all of the men of the farmstead, including the prisoner Hoel, whom Colgrin had been assigned to guard, leave to scatter the wolves that are attacking the sheep, Colgrin remains at his post. Anna asks him "...Why are you here,/ You, taking up space as though time didn't begin/ Until the day after to-morrow?..." (I.). Colgrin replies that because the prisoner has left is an even better reason "Why the other half of the arrangement should stand" (I.). The stable should not follow a runaway horse, he says, claiming that he is a man who can be depended on to do his job.

In Venus Observed<sup>7</sup> the image of Dominic created through invective may be said to be a type of verbal caricature. Reedbeck, Dominic's father, calls him a "...vain, vexing, incomprehensible,/ Crimping, constipated duffer. What's your heart?/ All plum duff!... You grovelling little/ Gobemouche! ...You spigoted, bigoted, operculated prig" (II.i.). The Duke calls him a "...conscience-nudging,/ Parent-pesting, guilt-corroded child" (III.), and advises him to take a drink to wash his conscience down. Later, the Duke terms him a "...strapping,/ Ice-cold, donkey witted douche of tasteless water" (III.). He describes him as a person who thinks more of the sin than of the sinner. The rigidity, one-mindedness, of the character of Dominic as developed in this play indicates the distortion of the mind which, if Bergson's adaptation of the relationship of the soul and the body, appearance and reality is followed, the result could result in a physiognomy that would be comic.

Nicholas and Humphrey Devize in The Lady's not for Burning are "...inseparable, really twin natures, utterly/ Brothers, like the two ends of the same thought" (I.). They can be said to present the comic

physiognomy which results from mechanical inelasticity. Nicholas sees himself as having been "...conceived as a hammer/ And born in a rising wind" (I.). He was "Compounded of all combustibles,/ The world's inside. I'm the receipt God followed/ In the creation. It took the roof off his oven" (I.). Humphrey tags him a "death-watch beetle" (II.) and Thomas Mendip calls him a "...neighing horse-box-kicker..." (III.). He describes himself in the cellar "...in cobwebs up to my armpits,/ Hammering the door and yelling like a slaughter-house" (III.).

Humphrey, the other half of this distorted pair, is called "You slawsy poodle, you tike,/ You crapulous puddering pipsqueak!" (I.) and "O blastoderm of injustice,/ You multiplication of injustice" (I.). (Nicholas) Jennet Jourdemayne is troubled that she hesitates to save her life by accepting the young lecher (Humphrey). She tells him that he is not unattractive to her, "Except that you have the manners of a sparrow-hawk,/ With less reason...But even so/ I no more run to your arms than I wish to run/ To death..." (III.).

Thomas calls Nicholas and Humphrey "Romulus and Remus" (III.). Their characters, again, built up through the rhetoric of vilification represent a distortion of what is expected in a human being. They have developed what amounts to a single character which is the primary distortion. This character has the basic rigidity and automatism which apparently deny the inner working of a vital, supple intelligence and results in a lack of gracefulness, an immobility which is comic.

If Bergson's idea that the effort of a soul to shape the matter of the body is seen in every human form; if appearance is the measure of reality, then it would seem that the directors of Thor, With Angels, Venus Observed, and The Lady's not for Burning would be justified in presenting

Colgrin, Dominic, Nicholas and Humphrey as having comic physiognomies.

### Chapter III

#### The Comic Element in Movements

Christopher Fry applies in his comedies the sense of the comic element in movement and gesture as analyzed by Bergson. According to the discussion of the quality of the comic in movements presented by Bergson, "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine."<sup>1</sup> In order to concentrate the implications of this statement Bergson eliminates the possibility of caricature and focuses attention on the clear and subtle disguise of a man as a puppet. This impression needs both clarity and subtlety in order to preserve the dual image of machine-man.

The deception that an internal machine dictates the actions of man is illusory and the cause is often lost in the effect of laughter. Analysis of this cause reveals that gesture, intended to vitalize speech, should accept the law of life which is the "...complete negation of repetition."<sup>2</sup> If a gesture reoccurs in a regular pattern to the extent that an observer is able to predict its occurrence, laughter results.

Imitation of gestures is humorous because of this same element of repetition. A person may be imitated whenever he allows himself to move automatically, repeating gestures and thus betraying the fact that at least one part of him is acting as a machine. A comic imitating a person observes these facets of movements or gestures which are a result of automatism and recreates them in his own gestures. Because the nature of ideas places them in a constant flux, the expression of these ideas through gesture that is repetitious or automatic indicates the existence

of a machine-like quality in the ideas themselves. Further laughter ensues if the movements, observed as mechanical in substance, are adapted in form to some recognizably mechanical situation; hence the comics change stock gestures into sawing wood or catching flies. Parody consists in an interpretation of the mechanical movement in word or gesture.

"The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself."<sup>3</sup> The comic stage situation which presents two or more characters acting exactly alike achieves laughter because the audience recognizes in it the substitution of the mechanical for the human. This is true not only of the copies, but of the one copied, in that in order to be copied, his movements must have that same mechanical quality which allows for prediction of occurrence and reoccurrence.

Bergson's discussion of appearance and reality as it relates to the cause of the comic in forms, is followed by a study of the comic element in movement. He makes use of another common philosophical approach: operations follow from essences. If the operations, in this case, movements or gestures, of a human being are basically mechanical or automatic, then the inference may be taken that the essence of that human being is mechanical. Preserving the original suspension of emotion, a man viewed in such operations is humorous because he is not operating in the way expected of him.

A problem similar to that discussed in the investigation of the comic in forms in the plays of Christopher Fry exists in an attempt to apply the principles evolved by Bergson in relation to the comic in movements. Approach it from the same general premise; that is, that the comedy of Fry, dependent as it is on words, does employ the concepts

basic to the comic in movements, but presents them in a different manner to achieve the same type of comedy.

The primary distortion of Nicholas and Humphrey in The Lady's not for Burning, whereby they are presented as "...two ends of the same thought" (I.), is representative of the use of the contrary to the expectation that life does not repeat itself. Many of their suggested movements display a machine-like quality. Nicholas knocks Humphrey down. Humphrey lands in a bed of daffodils. Although it is raining, he lies there, explaining that since he did not knock himself down, he should not have to pick himself up. This happens off stage and is presented through dialogue. Nicholas enters carrying Humphrey, evoking the humor of the copy carrying a copy.

In the same play, Jennet Jourdemayne describes the life of her father, who had been a scientist (an alchemist). Her account of his life contains the picture of a man mechanized by science. He gave an "...algebraic cry..." at birth. He "...matured by a progression, gained/ Experience by correlation, expanded/ Into a marriage by contraction...." Truth became the "...sum of sums,/ And Death the long division..." (II.). Here, in the case of the scientist turned puppet, moved by the strings of formulae, is humor as prescribed by Bergson, resulting from finding the mechanical where least expected.

Skipps, the rag and bone man speaks in parody of Biblical phrases, "...wiv holy weeping and washing of teeth..." and "Peace on earth and good tall women. And give us our trespassers as trespassers will be prosecuted for us...." As Skipps "...floats in the heaven of the grape..." (III.) his movements could be any combination of the standard repertoire used to portray drunks on stage. The basic notion of the



man-puppet is inherent in the movements suggested for this character. Doto in A Phoenix Too Frequent<sup>4</sup> gets drunk on the soldier's wine, although she explains away a hiccup as a result of having had no breakfast. While Dynamene and Tegeus discuss life, death and love, Doto injects the toast, "The Master" (I.) often enough to explain her drunkenness at the end of the scene. At the conclusion of the play, Tegeus and Dynamene plan to marry and Doto again toasts, "The master. Both masters" (I.). The humor of repetition of those words building to the climax plus the suggested effect of her drinking on her movements and gestures opens the way for an interpretation of Doto as a comic character in this sense.

Venus Observed presents dialogue suggesting the type of movement or gesture that results from a machine-like control of certain facets of personality. Perpetua, seeing her father for the first time in ten years, exclaims, "Let me look at you. Every feature where I left it/ Ten years ago!..." (I.i.). Hilda, in describing her husband who does not appear on stage explains that "He tries to be a copy of all his kind" (III.). She recognizes that this automatism is non-human though, and corrects this by saying that "...He is a Roderic-phenomenon" (III.).

The typical reaction of a man whose movements are apparently controlled by a mechanism is that of Reddleman when he is trying to convince the Duke not to climb down the ladder in order to save himself from the burning building. It would be, he explains, "Encouraging robbery/ And violence...to set your foot/ On a ladder propped up against your property/ Without permission, and in the middle of the night/" (II.ii.).

The soul, as the imparter of a "portion of its winged lightness to the body it animates,"<sup>5</sup> is apparently not recognized by Bates in Venus Observed. He says, "I'd just like to know who give him permission/ To go measuring my soul?.../ I've got it nicely laid away: spotless/ Wiv lavender/" (III.). With soul laid away, the possibility of his operations appearing mechanical presents itself.

In the same play, Jessie explains that she writes a few lines to her father every day. "...He can't read a word/ Of my handwriting, and doesn't try, but he likes/ The postman" (II.i.). When asked why she writes so much, she explains that her father lives quite a way from the post office and she wants to make the walk worth the postman's time. This same sense of the comic ensuing from a machine-like action of what should be an intellectual effort is found to be true of the handwriting of the Countess in The Dark Is Light Enough.<sup>6</sup> Kassel remarks that he has always found "Her handwriting to be her way, not/ Of giving but of withholding information" (I.). Later, the Countess, in speaking of the freedom to change one's mind explains, "...I change my mind/ For pure relaxation, two or three times a day" (I.). In these ways, the portrait of the Countess is developed with a certain puppet like quality. Belman speaks of the marriage of the Countess' daughter, Gelda, to Richard Gettner as having taken place because "...the Countess thought she should marry her daughter to him,/ I imagine to celebrate the tenth reprinting" (I.) of his only book.

Belman further develops this comment on the machinery of life when speaking of a duel he has agreed to take part in with Jakob. "Let us, by all means, shoot at one another/ If you think that will improve human nature" (I.). Stefan's description of the after-battle actions of two

armies which reflect a like devotion to rules revealing a machine-like dedication to form. "They rounded a corner and came face to face/ And were startled into a fight. They hurt each other/ And both sides have retired to look it all up/ In Heister's Tactics and Military Manoeuvre" (II.).

The Boy with a Cart presents one incident in the nature of movement of a human being on the level of the non-human. In the case of Mrs. Fipps, who bitterly opposes Cuthman's attempt to build a church, is found an example of a human being moved not by the internal mechanism, but by nature in the form of the wind that lifts her out of the controversy. "It is carrying her up as high as the trees,/ Zigzag like a paper bag, like somebody's hat!" (I.). Insistent as she was on the importance of preserving the old order, she is puppet-tossed, this time with the wind pulling the strings.

The discussion of the comic in movement and gesture as analyzed by Bergson has some relevancy in a study of the plays of Fry. In the instances here developed, characters display, discuss, or at least recognize a mechanical, puppet-like or automatic reaction in themselves or in others, originating from an essence which may rightfully be expected to be non-mechanical, original, and graceful. As a matter of fact no one character implicated in this discussion as having certain qualities of the mechanical is wholly so. Even the drunkards, Skipps and Doto, preserve for the most part the operations of an essence that is non-mechanical. The intent of this discussion has been to show that Fry realizes in his plays the sense of the comic element in movement and gesture as analyzed by Bergson. One of Fry's distinguishing characteristics, however, is the recognition of this same essence as spiritual

and the depicting of its operations as such.

## Chapter IV

### The Expansive Force of the Comic

It would seem necessary that "the process of deduction ought from time to time to stop and study certain culminating effects..."<sup>1</sup> in order to establish clearly the pattern of the logic. While there is as yet no single formula on which the comic effect depends, there has evolved one rather important attribute of comic means: "Something mechanical encrusted on the living."<sup>2</sup> Around this attribute are assembled further characteristics of the comic which should be explained before continuing the study of the various aspects of the comic. The first of these is that any disguise, whether of man, nature, or society, is comic in that the disguise is momentarily mistaken for the essential being. Hence clothing that because of age, condition, or situation is out of keeping achieves laughter because of the realization that the person has not recognized the natural mobility of life in the form of fashion. By the same logic, a person who applies make-up as a disguise, changing the color of a part or all of his skin creates the same reaction as one who wears a costume. Next, by the "logic of the imagination"<sup>3</sup> a person who is naturally a different color appears as a white man in disguise and is, therefore, humorous. Bergson reaches this conclusion by the following analogy which he says is based on the "logic of the imagination.... A man in disguise is comic. A man we regard as disguised is also comic. So, by analogy, any disguise is soon to become comic, not only that of a man, but that of society also, and even the disguise of nature."<sup>4</sup>

Nature is disguised when man attempts to create the image that something mechanical or something completely human has replaced the natural law governing nature. In a nature that is "mechanically tampered with"<sup>5</sup> is found a source of the comic.

The second aspect of the comic directly related to the theme "Something mechanical encrusted on the living"<sup>6</sup> is concerned with society. Composed as it is of living, human beings, a society which disguises itself is comic in the way a disguised man is comic. In this case the disguise, the costume or make-up, is conventional or ceremonial. If the ceremonial of a society is to be viewed as comic, it needs only to be considered as an end instead of a means. Just as the comic enters when the clothes become more vital than the man who wears them so does the comic enter when the ceremonials of society become more vital than the reasons for the ceremonials. When the ceremonial takes precedent over the reason for the ceremony, then society, instead of controlling its own functions, is controlled by conventions which lack purpose.

The final stage of the development of Bergson's views on this subject is that in which man attempts to regulate or replace the natural law.

Further application of this theme, the representation of the living in terms of the mechanical, reveals the comic element in any incident in which attention is focused on the physical side of a person when it is the moral side that should be considered. A person who is either intensely bashful or embarrassed by his body, in this giving of disproportionate heed to his body achieves a comic effect as a result of displaced emphasis.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between laughter created by a mind ossified into a pattern of routine and the body made inflexible through the defective response is a natural one. If laughter results from a mistake of letter for spirit, of physical for moral or ceremonial for function, the perception presented to the imagination is one of likeness in kind.

Finally the disparity of the mechanical overlaid on the living is seen in those situations where a person "gives us the impression of being a thing."<sup>8</sup> Whether the thing the person becomes is a block of wood, a robot, or the job he does; this lack of proper proportion is a cause of the comic.

Fry does not use the device of physical disguise to obtain humor. There is some slight feeling of it in the connotation of witch as applied to Jenet Jourdemayne. References to the traditional impediments belonging to witches, spells, and broomsticks help to build the illusion of paradox because Jenet is in fact a beautiful woman of earth.

Society bound up in the letter of the law is presented as a comic element in several of Fry's plays. The public official ruling according to the letter of the law, which rule is obviously ridiculous in application, is found in A Phoenix Too Frequent. Doto explains to the soldier that they had had trouble getting permission from the town council for their death watch. "They said/ They couldn't have a tomb used as a private residence/ But madam told them she wouldn't be eating here,/ Only suffering, and they thought that would be all right" (I.). Another comment on officialdom in this play is found in the discussion between Dynamene and Tegeus in which she tells him that he has no realization of the supernatural. He claims to have connections on the basis that some of his relations are dead.

Another official who turns the administrative routine of his office into a way of life is Hebble Tyson, the Mayor in The Lady's not for Burning. Thomas Mendip greets Tyson, saying that he is about to become his gateway to eternal rest. Tyson answers "Dear sir, I haven't yet been notified/ Of your existence. As far as I'm concerned/ You don't exist. Therefore you are not entitled/ To any rest at all, eternal or temporary,/ And I would be obliged if you'd sit down" (I.). In answer to the dual problem of burning Jennet and not hanging Thomas, Tyson says throughout the play, this will all be gone into at the proper time. When Thomas says he has come to be hanged, Tyson asks him if he has filled out the proper forms.

The ceremonial viewed as an end is used in The Dark Is Light Enough in the devotion to the custom of the Countess to gather with her friends on Thursdays to discuss life, philosophy and wit. That this is to be done on Thursdays becomes important enough to delay the birth of a child or to rise from a death bed.

The substitution of man for the natural law in regard to nature is employed as a comic element in Venus Observed. The Duke has arranged a party to view an eclipse. Reedbeck's daughter unexpectedly arrives in England from America and the Duke tells Reedbeck, "Then, of course, she shall join us to see the eclipse./ It will be a nice change for her, after America" (I.). Reedbeck sends word to his housekeeper to send his daughter to the Observatory where "There will be refreshment for her, and a total/ Eclipse of the sun" (I.). Later the Duke excuses himself for being late, explaining, "I was up all night with the universe again/ And slept late..." (I.). In these instances nature becomes subject in a sense to man and Bergson's sense of the comic element which is a result



of man attempting to replace the natural law is present.

The focus of attention on the physical side of man when the moral side should be considered, as a comic element, is found on a slightly different level in a speech by David in A Sleep of Prisoners.<sup>9</sup> Speaking of the church in which the four men are imprisoned he refers to the "...smell of cooped-up angels" (I.). Peter thinks he means the prisoners, but he says, "Not mother's angels,/ ...God's angels" (I.).

Doto describes one of the men she has loved, "...He smelt of sour grass/ And was likeable. He collected ebony quoits" (I.i.). Dynamene, also in A Phoenix Too Frequent, in trying to explain her attraction to Tegeus says, "...It is/ Your eyes, I think; or your intelligence/ Holding my intelligence up above you/ Between its hands. Or the cut of your uniform" (I.). Again, the equalization of the physical and moral is found when the Duke in Venus Observed warns Reddleman to be gentle with Bates so as not to drive him back to his nervous habits, "Of biting his nails and burglary" (I.). Kassel exhorts the Countess in The Light Is Dark Enough to "Give to illness the same respectful hearing/ I've seen you give to bores and fools" (III.).

Humor results from a parody on the philosophic statement: I think therefore I am, in a speech by Thomas Mendip in The Lady's not for Burning. Consciously employing the basic fallacy of positing the conclusion in the major premise and replacing the intellectual with the physical, Thomas says, "I breathe,/ I spit, I am" (I.).

Fry does not, except by implication as indicated throughout this discussion, use the comic element to show a person becoming or being mistaken for a thing. The idea is basic, of course, in the automatic actions of many of his characters, yet no one of his characters actually

crosses the barrier to thing-ness.

## Chapter V

### The Comic Element in Situations

"Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement."<sup>1</sup> The three basic elements found in comic situations are repetition; the delusion of a man who thinks he acts freely, but is actually a puppet; and an effect which grows out of proportion to its cause resulting, at times, in a reversal of situation. Bergson considers comedy a game that mimics life. He maintains that the adult is amused, made joyful by the same type of situations that caused him to laugh as a child. He compares the laughter of a child with a Jack-in-the-box to the Laughter of an adult witnessing the perception, repression and presentation of an idea. The basic element of one stubborn force, neutralized by an equally persistent force on the moral level, owes a debt to the child's pertinacity in pushing the little man back into his box and to the mechanical man jumping out with persevering regularity. In the world of words, two qualities are required to attain the humor of repetition, a restrained feeling that is insistent and a counter-idea that enjoys imposing the restraints.<sup>2</sup>

"All that is serious in life comes from our freedom."<sup>3</sup> Man's tenacious insistence on his own freedom has made it possible for him to present a tragic protest, to persevere in those actions which are his own and to be a hero or a villain. In order to translate these actions into the realm of the comic all that is needed is to intimate that freedom is specious, control is held by another power.

An effect which grows out of proportion to its cause, resulting at times in a reversal of situation, is comic for the same reason that the collapse of a house of cards, the chain reaction of a line of dominoes when the first in the line is knocked over, or the return of a boomerang to its starting place are comic to a child. However "lack of proportion between cause and effect, whether appearing in one or in the other, is never the direct source of laughter."<sup>4</sup> For the cause of the comic effect, it is necessary to return to the idea of the mechanical arrangement inherent in the cause and effect relationship. It is, moreover, a result of a sense of absentmindedness on the part of life in regard to the continuative nature of human events. If life were consistently aware of this matter, nothing in the nature of what is called a chance meeting would occur. If man on his part were always aware of life, he would not give the appearance of a stringed puppet; hence, he would not be considered comic. "The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life."<sup>5</sup> Laughter is the remedy which is intended to arrest the mechanical reaction to life.

Man as a finite creature, existing in time and space, has, as a result of these conditions, a life which includes "...a continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series...which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical."<sup>6</sup> In contrapuntal arrangement to these conditions are the conditions of "...repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of a series."<sup>7</sup>

Repetition in stage comedies becomes increasingly comic if the playwright is able to reconcile the two seemingly exclusive conditions of complexity and naturalness. Inversion is achieved when the positions of the characters in a given situation are reversed. Reciprocal interference of a series (interference indicates the "...partial superposition and neutralization, by each other, of two series of light-waves."<sup>8</sup>) is a method of achieving laughter through a situation which allows for interpretation on two divergent levels because it belongs to two independent series of events. The two series of events may coincide in time, or they may not, but the misunderstanding and equivocal nature of the divergent interpretations existing independently are bound together by coincidence.<sup>9</sup>

Christopher Fry is more interested in what he terms the climate of his comedies than with the detailing of a series of situations presented dramatically or with the life of man made comic through technique. The climax of his plays depends for the most part on a clash between intelligences and the reconciliation of these intelligences.<sup>10</sup> Fry enjoys presenting an unconventional situation. His plots are naive, often built on an unexpected twist (inversion), sometimes the miraculous enters (a man not completely free), and at times the plots are simply flights of fancy (reciprocal interference of a series).<sup>11</sup> Locating the time setting in the "...unassailable past or the droll present for his pieces to play themselves out in, Fry leaves himself free to indulge his fancy. In effect, the comedies are timeless."<sup>12</sup>

A situation in The Dark Is Light Enough which employs repetition centers around the three visits Colonel Janik makes to the home of the Countess. The first visit he makes as a hunter of Richard Gettner, a

deserter from his army; the second he makes as a conqueror, taking over the house for military use; the third he makes as one hunted, a deserter himself, hiding in the same belfrey that hid Richard Gettner on his first visit. When the army comes for him, it is this same Richard who is to protect him. As is evident, the element of inversion is also inherent in the situation. Another situation in which inversion takes place in this play is the agreement of Gelda and the Countess to allow Gelda's husband, Peter, whom both love, to be taken as a hostage for Gettner, whom nobody really likes.

The obvious inversion in A Phoenix Too Frequent is the birth of a new love in the tomb of an old love. There are other instances of inversion in the play. Doto, a prosaic, earthy person agrees to sit the death watch with her mistress because "...Death's a new interest in life" (I.). She explains that, "It all started with madam saying a man/ Was two men really, and I'd only noticed one,/ ... It seems he has a soul/ As well as his other troubles. And I like to know/ What I'm getting with a man" (I.). Repetition and inversion are present in the situation where Tegeus convinces Dynamene to live for love of him, then Dynamene convinces him not to take his own life, but to live for love of her. Dynamene came to her husband's tomb to give her live body for love of him; the situation inverts and she gives his dead body to save the life of her new love.

Venus Observed employs inversion in the situation where the Duke says that it is up to his son to choose who shall be his mother. When the candidates arrive Edgar says that he has a feeling of pre-natal tension. The topsy-turvy situation of another son, Dominic, lecturing his father on honesty the necessity of preserving their good name comes

after he discovers that his father, Reedbeck has been stealing from the Duke through falsifying accounts. The lecture grows into a plan which reveals the situation of a man who thinks he acts freely when actually control is in the hands of another. Perpetua, Reedbeck's daughter is persuaded by Dominic to marry the Duke in order to save her father from prison. As the situation evolves, however, the Duke explains that, "There exists/ A document assigning to your father/ All these percentages from rents and sales/ Which you seem to have thought misbegotten" (III.). Reedbeck who has had no qualms about stealing from the Duke, has many qualms about receiving such gifts. He is upset to learn that he has not in fact been acting freely in his stealing, and says, "I couldn't think/ Of allowing such generosity. Legalized/ No, your Grace, I simply couldn't accept it" (III.).

An effect out of proportion to its cause is apparent in the plan to burn the lady in The Lady's not for Burning. Jenet Jourdemayne is accused of being a witch on the following evidence: her father has been an alchemist; she lives alone and experiments with his equipment; she speaks French to her poodle and owns a peacock which dines indoors with her on Sundays. Thomas Mendip, confessing to no crime, but wanting to live, is sentenced to burn at the stake. This leads into a situation comic as a result of reciprocal interference of a series. Thomas, who finds nothing in life worth the living, comes to the mayor's house to find death. Jenet, who would live a free and independent life, is chased to the mayor's house. The meeting of the two results in both of them forfeiting that which they sought, yet both of them are essentially unchanged. Jenet forfeits her freedom and independence for love. Thomas forfeits death for another fifty years

or so, yet he says, "I love you, but the world's not changed. Perhaps/  
I could draw you up over my eyes for a time/ But the world sickens me  
still" (III.).

Both the Duke and Rosabel in Venus Observed originate a series of events, the object of which is to terminate the Duke's love trysts in the Observatory Room. The Duke seeks the termination through the selection of a wife. He secretly arranges to meet Perpetua in the room, planning to ask her to marry him. Perpetua has already promised Dominic that she will marry the Duke. Rosabel, learning that the Observatory is to be empty, plans to terminate all love trysts held there by burning the building. She burns it while the Duke and Perpetua are in it, but they escape. The result is the termination as intended, but the interference as well as the sense of a man-puppet enters the situation. The Duke is to have a wife, Rosabel, which is what he sought; Rosabel is to have the Duke after she is released from the prison term she will receive for burning the building.



## Chapter VI

### The Comic Element in Words

The reason a special study is devoted to the comic in words revolves around the difference between "...the comic expressed and the comic created by language."<sup>1</sup> The comedy created by language is based on an absendminded use of language. The comic effect of language may be termed witty, in which case it causes laughter directed at a third person, or at ourselves; or it may be termed comic, in which case it provokes laughter directed at the person speaking. Wit in the general sense is a result of a dramatic personification of words. Hence, any poet may become a wit by disregarding feeling and stressing the intellectual. Wit as connected to theatrical comedy consists in the ability to create a comic effect that is subtle and fleeting. Every variety of comedy discussed in this study is capable of being transposed into wit, and, conversely, every witty remark, when analyzed, may be categorized according to the comic element. In order to understand both wit and comedy, analysis of the elements of the comic in actions and situations as applied to language will reveal both the comic in words and the various kinds of wit.

"A comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form."<sup>2</sup> This general rule contains within it indications of various elements of the comic as they relate to language. Absentmindedness, automatism, and rigidity, each have counterparts in language. The mistake of considering the physical side of a person when it is the moral side which should be of interest

is found on the level of language whenever an expression that is intended figuratively is taken literally. This extends further into the realm of the symbol. If a symbol is expanded on the material side, while maintaining a pretense of retention of the symbolism, laughter results.

Returning once more to the idea that a series of events may become comic by repetition, by inversion, or by reciprocal interference of a series, the next step will show the application of these conditions to words. "We may thus surmise that a phrase is likely to become comic, if, though reversed, it still makes sense; or if it expresses equally well two quite independent sets of ideas; or, finally, if it has been obtained by transposing an idea into some key other than its own."<sup>3</sup> In inversion, the least interesting but simplest to achieve, word order in a sentence is reversed retaining a meaning but reversing the sense. Reciprocal interference of a series consists in a single expression with a double meaning, or the pun, which is apparently one sentence with two meanings. Actually the pun is two different sentences using different words, but sounding alike. The play on words in which there is one sentence in which two different ideas are expressed is also classed under the heading, reciprocal interference of a series. This comic effect includes the element of the absentminded in language.

Transposition of the natural expression of an idea into a different environment is another method of creating the comic through language. This transposition may be from the solemn to the familiar (parody), from the small to the large (exaggeration), or from the disreputable to the reputable. The transposition may be reversed and the comic effect will remain. The contrast suggested in this transposition may be that of the

real with the ideal. If this is stated in terms of what should be done, the ironic element enters. If the statement refers to what is being done as if it were the correct thing, the element of humor enters. Both irony and humor belong to the category of satire. Irony is by nature oratorical; whereas, humor includes elements of a scientific nature. "A humourist is a moralist disguised as a scientist, something like an anatomist who practices dissection with the sole object of filling us with disgust; so that humour, in the restricted sense in which we are here regarding the word, is really a transposition from the moral to the scientific."<sup>4</sup>

Christopher Fry has "...admitted that for him the pleasure, the excitement of words is that they are living and generating things, and he is, indeed, obsessively suspicious of any arrangement of words that has become staled by long usage."<sup>5</sup> His most unusual accomplishment is the discovery of a twentieth-century verse form for comedy. The rhythm and imagery which he employs enlarges the intellectual and emotional range of the comic. His very felicity for words at times appears as an end instead of a means. He defends his use of words by saying that at times in his comedies the words are "...an ornament on the meaning and not the meaning itself...almost as often I have meant the ornament to be, dramatically or comedically, an essential part of the meaning."<sup>6</sup> Fry attempts to achieve a balance in his verse so that his dialogue will sound like colloquial conversation yet rise to the dramatic occasion. His is not the "prevalent staccato drivel, the gutter-bred language polished to curbstone heights and the telegraphic lingo that pass for alive dramatic speech, but...the swing and flow and lovely song of the English tongue when set free by the hand of an unafraid and imaginative

artist."<sup>7</sup>

Bergson has explained that all a poet need do to become a wit is to disregard the emotion and stress the intellect; yet Fry, a poet and a comic artist, has combined the two facets of creativity. His is a dramatic art which combines the intellect and the emotions, comedy and poetry. This perhaps helps illuminate one of the differences noted in the discussion of the development of Bergson's theory of the comic as compared with Fry's theory of the comic.

Following the catalog of the comic in words as outlined by Bergson and cognizant of the condition that it be the comic created by language, the idea of the absurd as expressed in a well-established pattern will be considered first. In The Dark Is Light Enough, Stefan says, "But these Hungarian nationalists think they stand/ For truth and light and kill accordingly" (I.). Doto in A Phoenix Too Frequent, observes, "If I/ Mean to die I'd better see what I'm doing" (I.), and speaks of death as if it were just one more bothersome detail of life. She accepts a drink from Tegeus, explaining, "...There's no point in dying/ Of everything simultaneous" (I.). Her mistress is concerned that Doto is going to die with her and asks, "...Have you/ No grief of your own to die of?" (I.).

In The Lady's not for Burning, Nicholas tells his mother that he has just been reborn. His mother replies, "Nicholas, you always think/ You can do things better than your mother" (I.). Humphrey, in this play, refuses to be bewitched "...by scents/ of new-mown hell..." (III.). Thomas who sees much that is absurd in life reflects this in his use of the absurd in the well-established phrase-form. To the Chaplain, he says, "God bless you, in case you sneeze" (II.). He accuses the town

officials of accepting a bribe from Jennet to burn her at the stake. He demands "...fair play/ For the criminal classes!" (II.). Although he denigrates his own being and questions if any slut would hold him in her arms, Jennet reminds him that "Sluts are only human" (II.).

Thor, With Angels employs absentmindedness in language in which the absurd is couched in the colloquial. Clodesuida, the wife of the leader of the Jutes says of her husband, Cymen, "We have always/ Been god-fearing, but now it appears he fears/ More gods than he knows what to do with..." (I.). Cymen's son, Cheldric, urges his father, "Do, father, kill him, as any other fellow's/ Father would" (I.). Hoel, the British prisoner, questions, "...Why don't I settle/ To a steady job in the grave, instead of this damned/ Ambition for life, which doesn't even offer/ A living wage?..." (I.). Anna concludes a speech to her elderly husband Colgrin with, "And this isn't going to get the baby washed." Colgrin asks what baby she is talking about, Anna replies, "Can't I coin a phrase if I want to?" (I.). Martina, Cymen's daughter, explains to Hoel that the Queen is a Christian and that Cymen's family tries to keep this a secret. They pray, "Give us our daily bread and forgive us our Queen" (I.).

In Venus Observed, the Duke advises his guests to be mellow, "Remembering we've been on earth two million years,/ Man and boy and Sterkfontein ape" (I.). Another development of the absurd in language is the substitution of the literal for the figurative, which belongs in the same class of the comic as the mistake of the physical for the moral. Reedbeck, accused by his children of cheating the Duke, explains, " I hope/ I've done nothing so monosyllabic as to cheat./ A spade is never so merely a spade as the word/ Would imply" (II.i.).

The Chaplain in The Lady's not for Burning tells of a dream in which he stood on Jacob's ladder waiting to enter heaven, "And the ladder was made entirely of diminished sevenths" (II.). His confusion in this case is of two abstract concepts rather than of the material with the abstract, but language is used to create humor in the same general way. Margaret confuses the power of the human choice, saying, "It's unfortunate, considering the wide/ Choice of living matter on this globe,/ That I should have managed to be a mother" (III.).

Dynamene describes the position of her husband before his death in A Phoenix Too Frequent. He was in line for an important position in town government: a coming man. "O poor Virilius!" Dynamene laments, "To be a coming man/ Already gone..." (I.).

A symbol extended on the material side which maintains the pretence of the symbol is used by Reedbeck in explaining the symbolism of the Temple of the Ancient Virtues in Venus Observed. It was ordered built by the third Duke of Altair for his wife Claire, "For her use when she played the part of the Delphic Oracle,/ A way she had of informing the Duke of her pregnancy,/ Which she did on twenty-seven separate occasions" (II.i.). Richard Gettner in The Dark Is Light Enough speaks symbolically of the Thursday evening gatherings, "...The intellectual soul/ Of Europe comes down to the stream to drink. What's this/ Floating belly-upwards? A dead fish?/ Gettner, by God!" (I.).

Reversal as a means of creating the comic in language is also found in this play. Jakob says, "I should have/ No peace for a moment if I thought I lacked anxiety" (I.). The Countess disclaims innocence,

saying, "Innocent?/ I am always perfectly guilty of what I do" (I.).

Fry is "essentially a comic poet, he loves puns, and he loves the sound of words."<sup>8</sup> Word play is evident in The Dark Is Light Enough when Bella replies to Gelda's advice to forget Richard, "What has he ever done good enough to forget?" (III.). Doto complains in A Phoenix Too Frequent, "If we can't be free of men in a grave/ Death's a dead loss" (I.). Awakening, but thinking she is dead, she feels invisible and explains, "I'm a wraith, madam; I'm only/ Waiting to be wafted" (I.). She expects to feel at home in the netherworld, for, "...When you belong/ To an upper class, the netherworld might come strange./ Now I was born nether, Madam, though not/ As nether as some" (I.). In The Firstborn<sup>9</sup> Teusret asks if all the Jewish boys were killed; Anath replies, "Yes, they all died of a signature" (I.i.).

Language used to create a comic effect through word play is evident in The Lady's not for Burning. Margaret says, "One day I shall burst my bud/ Of calm, and blossom into hysteria" (I.). Considering what she thinks is a double request for death, she questions, "Has death/ Become the fashionable way to live?" (I.). The Chaplain has a speech which is made up of various nuances of the comic created by word play.

I know I am not  
A practical person; legal matters and so forth  
Are Greek to me, except, of course,  
That I understand Greek, And what may seem nonsensical  
To men of affairs like yourselves might not seem so  
To me, since everything astonishes me,  
Myself most of all. When I think of myself  
I can scarcely believe my senses. But there it is,  
All my friends tell me I actually exist  
And by an act of faith I have come to believe them.  
But this fellow who is being such a trouble to us,  
He, on the contrary, is so convinced  
He is that he wishes he was NOT. Now why  
Should that be? (II.)

The Chaplain here considers the problem of existence and, although he includes elements of a philosophical, metaphysical and even epistemological nature, (problem of being as opposed to non-being, can man know truth, how does man perceive knowledge, are the senses reliable) he does so in language which presents a sort of word game.

The transposition of the natural expression of an idea into a different environment is the final division of the comic element in words. The Chaplain uses one form of it, parody, in the remark, "I sometimes remarkably lose/ Eternity in the passing moment" (I.). Thomas belabors Jenet in a long speech in which he calls her "A conscienceless hermaphrodite who plays/ Heaven off against hell, hell off against heaven/ ...." But his biggest disappointment in her is that "We have wasted paradox and mystery on you/ When all you ask for, is cause and effect! ---- A copy of your birth-certificate was all you needed/ To make you at peace with Creation" (II.).

Environmental transposition of words is found in the speech of Doto, "Here we are, dying to be dead/ And where does it get us?" (I.) in A Phoenix Too Frequent. Belmann, in The Dark Is Light Enough, remarks "...loving/ The enemy is almost the only commandment/ He's never broken" (I.), transposing the Biblical commandment into a critical comment.

The transposition between the real and the ideal is stated in terms of the ironic in this play when the Countess muses that the soldiers are "...so willing to die/ For what death will take away from them" (II.). Moses, in The Firstborn, speaks ironically when he says, "I followed a light into blindness" (III.ii.). There is irony also in Thomas' admonition, in The Lady's not for Burning, "Always fornicate/ Between



clean sheets and spit on a well-scrubbed floor" (II.).

Humor, as Bergson describes it as a part of transposition in which whatever is being done is viewed as the correct thing, is present in the explanation of how Bates came into the service of the Duke in Venus Observed. "He was caught/ Red-handed with the silver, and his Grace,/ Being short of staff at the time, asked him to stay/ And clean it"(I.). In The Firstborn when Moses is told by Aaron that thirty-eight men have been killed because they showed momentary impatience, Moses answers, "That was a good cure. They are now/ Patient for all eternity" (I.i.). The humor attendant on the forcing of the moral into the scientific is found in A Phoenix Too Frequent as Tegeus insists, "I'll have my free will even if I'm compelled to it./ I'll kill myself" (I.). The confusion of the intellectual and the emotional are expressed in the Chaplain's speech in The Lady's not for Burning, "I wish I were a thinking man, very much./ Of course I feel a good deal, but that's no help to you" (II.).

In creating the comic in words Fry does use methods outlined by Bergson. He believes that "...in explaining and re-creating life in terms of the stage we should use language as fully charged and as pliant as we can make."<sup>10</sup> Poetry is used for the purpose of "...making with a touch of beauty, the agreeable more agreeable and the disagreeable less so. It is the gift for making sentiment acceptable to cynics and cynicism acceptable to the sentimental."<sup>11</sup> Although the elements prescribed by Bergson as the cause of laughter from the comic created in words are found in Fry, the special quality of Fry's words is intrinsically connected to his own view of life, poetry and comedy.

## Chapter VII

### The Comic in Character

Man and the character of man is the central image around which the elements of the comic revolve. The implications of laughter on a social level are indicative of an inadaptability to society on the part of man. Any man is comic who goes about life mechanically, unconcerned that he is out of touch with society. Laughter seeks the return of such a man to the social norm. The ambiguous nature of the comic is evident when it is considered as half way between art and life. A person in life is comic only if viewed in the same way a stage comedy is viewed, yet the laughter aroused by a stage comedy is not completely esthetic pleasure. The desire to correct by laughter unifies the comic element in life and art at the same time that it places the comic in an equivocal position. A study of the elements of the comic in character in life and art indicates that the two coincide because of this corrective element in laughter.

Unsociability is the element in a character which allows the comic element to enter. Laughter may be directed at a trifling fault or at a too rigid virtue; the situation may be one of great or little import; both are dependent on the insensibility of the spectator. The quality of automatism with its attendant qualities, absentmindedness and rigidity, complete the elements that make up the comic in character. In one sense, all character is comic, if by character is meant type. It is this trend toward type that allows for imitation; it is this tendency toward the general rather than the particular that is characteristic of the comic

character.

In the creation of a comic type of character the basic element is vanity. This single fault, basic yet superficial, held unconsciously but obvious to others, may appear in the guise of a trifling fault, a vice, or a virtue. It is a quality which engages social laughter of a corrective nature, yet which is seldom cured by one dose. Since vanity is a result of a man's view of himself that is out of proportion to his place in the order of creation, the laughter of society seeks the return to the norm.

Vanity as displayed because of a profession often results when members of the profession consider that the public is meant for the profession. Another aspect of the professional comic is rigidity which carries the logic, vocabulary, or procedures of the profession into ordinary life.

Absurdity of a definite variety depends on a reversal of common sense in which the character seeks to adapt the world of reality to his own view of it. This singlemindedness partakes of elements that are present in the world of dreams; illusion of reality, relaxation of reasoning processes, and repetitive obsessions.

The comic character is such that a spectator could identify himself with it in certain aspects. The tendency is to relax and to accept the invitation to play with ideas. As the comic character takes the easy way of habit, lacks concern with social conventions, and abandons formal logic, so the spectator tends to follow the course of release of tension. As a member of society, however, this spectator checks his lapse of attention and laughter returns as a corrective. As such, it may act from a motive of love, to correct vice, to obtain justice, or to punish

lacks or excesses; yet its prime function is to intimidate through humiliation. On this function rests the requirement that laughter exists when emotion is absent.

Fry does not attempt to duplicate the real man for the stage. His characters are "...metaphors on man..."<sup>1</sup> They are real in the sense that they embody something of the mystery of human nature. For Fry, "The realistic play is not realistic at all, but just a slice off the top of existence. Writing a realistic play is like meeting a human being for the first time. The realist would observe this is Mr. So-and-So, that he has a beard, an accent, and a mole on his face. But the human being is far more peculiar, something that has gone on since the beginning of time, now miraculously summed up in the strange sort of mysterious creature that stands before us."<sup>2</sup> The comic characters in Fry's plays are always drawn in this light. It is for this reason, then, that they never become complete types, nor do they truly fit the general as opposed to the individual. This is perhaps a result of Fry's insistence that he always thinks of his characters in terms of the tragic, feeling that if they are not qualified for tragedy, they will not fulfill his sense of the comic. It has been observed that his plays contain "No really evil characters, only those too habituated to the mystery [absentmindedness], custom's creatures [mechanical], routine bound [dream-obsessions], clock ridden [rigidity], and prosaic."<sup>3</sup> At these evil characters is directed corrective laughter.

In A Phoenix Too Frequent, the prosaic, earthy Doto is the embodiment of the comic character in the tradition of the earthy, prosaic, slightly lecherous maids of dramatic history. Doto, who admits that men have been in and out of her life like a kind of stammer, is prepared to

die with her mistress in order to discover if man has a soul. This type of dream-logic continues as she counsels her mistress not to cry for her husband since she means to join him. She observes further that he will be glad to see her among "Them shapes of shades; all shapes of shapes and all/ Shades of shades..." (I.). Still misunderstanding Dynamene's tears, she continues on her single-minded idea, saying that if her husband is tempted by these shades, it will help to settle him down for, "It would only be fun, madam. He couldn't go far/ With a shade" (I.).

Whether Doto's past dealings with men represent a trifling failure or a vice, her presentation of them shows a refusal to adapt to the conventions of society. When Dynamene asks if she has no grief of her own to die of, Doto says, "Not really. They was all one to me./ Well, all but two was one to me" (I.). She dismisses Dynamene's suggestion that her life has been unhappy, explaining that it seemed quite lively. But now, having been introduced to the mystery of "One man made for one woman, etcetera, etcetera" (I.), she is quite prepared to die to find out about man's soul. She agrees to attempt to grieve a little, though she believes it would take lessons to do it out loud, for she cannot remember her fellows without laughing. She does remember giving away a good pair of shoes and this to her is a matter for tears.

Although she has said that she "...would rather have to sleep/ With a bald bee-keeper who was wearing his boots/ Than spend more days fasting and thirsting and crying/ In a tomb" (I.), she pretends to be disturbed when Tegeus enters with food and drink. There is a certain vanity in her reaction to Tegeus' speech in which he speaks of the hope he has gained from contact with loyalty and enduring passion. She says, "He means you, or you and me; or me, madam" (I.). Yet this kind of

statement could also be based on a supposition that her reactions are shared. She is immediately attracted by Tegeus' supper and knees, both of which she considers sympathetic. Her loyalty to her mistress is at least as selfless as that of her mistress to her dead husband, and in one sense of the word, her passion is enduring. After sharing Tegeus' wine, she proclaims, "I love all the world/ And the movement of the apple in your throat" (I.).

Doto finishes the soldier's wine and sleeps. When she awakens, she seeks to adapt the world of reality to her own view of it. Having planned to die, and having no recollection of going to sleep, she awakens and presumes she is dead. She finds that death is as easy as gulping an oyster. She says that she will have to sit out eternity because she is not only a shadow, but wonderfully shady in the knees. When she finally realizes that she is after all alive, she is again distressed. She asks after Tegeus, and Dynamene explains that he came and went. Doto does not realize what has happened. She says, "And went/ He should have, come he should never" (I.). She absolutely refuses to leave Dynamene for fear she will get to Hades first, but when she finally realizes that Dynamene has a new interest in life, she agrees to leave death to some other occasion. The elements of the mechanical as opposed to the individual are present in her decision to die as well as in her decision to live. She is so much of earth that death appealed to her as a way to find out more about life, yet this lack of common sense would not endure alone. She was adaptable to the society of her mistress, Dynamene, and as such was willing to be inadaptably to society as a whole. Yet the laughter that results from the comic elements in the character of Dynamene is not intended to humiliate in the sense that Bergson would have laughter

correct. The spectator joins with her in her lapse from logic, laughs at her failure to adapt to society; yet the desire to change by that laughter is not wholly present.

Two characters in The Lady's not for Burning emerge as comic figures, Hebble Tyson and the Chaplain. The Chaplain does not conform to what society decrees that a Chaplain should be, yet within his dream logic is that sense of a deeper reality that indicates that it might be society's image that needs correction. He recognizes the demand for a thinking man and is sorry that he is just a man of feeling. The Chaplain had wanted to be a musician and, as this was prohibited to him, he has taken his viol as his mistress, his better half. He carries this Platonic image throughout the entire play as his dream-obsession. It culminates in despair because he has made his instrument commit sins of sound. He had tried to play a dance tune, but found he should not venture beyond religious pieces.

In spite of his failure as a thinking man, it is the Chaplain who suggests the plan to induce Thomas to give up his desire to be hanged. His plan to expose Thomas to the joy of life by sentencing him to attend a party is concocted of dream-logic, yet it is the plan that is used, and it does work.

The quality of absentmindedness is his, as is the failure to adapt to the social standard that decrees that a man should be ambitious for advancement. When Tappercoom advises him to be more sociable, to "Let the butterflies come to you, Chaplain,/ Or you'll never be pollinated into a Bishop" (III.), he continues in his determination that he should be cast down for his treatment of his viol. As with Doto, the laughter directed at the Chaplain recognizes his separatist tendencies, but the

spectator does not fully will his return to the norm. He feels his own futility because he had hoped to see Thomas and Jennet dance, but they did not dance, because, he feels, he played so poorly. Tappercoom comforts, "They shall, dear saint, they shall" (III.). This, then, is the tone Fry takes with the comic character of the Chaplain.

Hebble Tyson belongs as a comic character to the class of those afflicted with professional vanity. He has carried the trappings of his office into every part of his life and even finds a sense of humor incompatible with good citizenship. Everything must be done according to formula; his prayer is directed to "Almighty/ God more precise than a clockmaker;/ Grant us all a steady pendulum" (I.). He will not brook interference with his sense of order, remaining rigid in his stand that the town will not hang just anybody. Absentminded as he is, he hears only enough of Jennet's speech to be sure that she is guilty of any charge. He perservered in his own sense of reality, insisting that the men Thomas claims to have murdered are not dead at all. By this same sort of logic, while he insists on the letter of the law, he gathers evidence, tries, and convicts Jennet of the crime of witchcraft by eavesdropping on a conversation between Jennet and Thomas. He demands that "The standard soul/ Must mercilessly be maintained. No/ Two ways of life. One God, one point of view./ A general acquiescence to the mean" (III.). In drawing this sketch of professional vanity, Fry comes closer to the laughter that intends to correct by humiliation. This is a picture of a man who has lost touch with the reality of life because he is so inmeshed in the impedimenta of his profession.

Reedbeck in Venus Observed is a comic character with a vice to be corrected by laughter. He has translated his dreams of himself as



a center of civilization or a noble patrician into reality. In order to support his kind of life, he juggles the Duke's accounts by a process of taxation which he calls Reedbequity. He fulfills the requirements of the comic character of vanity in that he is quite unconscious about either his vice or his vanity. He can even justify Reedbequity. As he appreciates beauty and the Duke does not, he saves the Duke's pride, and steals his money. The place of corrective laughter in relation to this character is obvious, especially when realizing his moral myopia and ready to go to jail, he finds out that the Duke has known about Reedbequity all along. The essential vanity reappears, and Reedbeck claims that he could not take the money as a gift. This vanity is seen in another posture of Reedbeck, his extreme modesty with regard to his beautiful daughter. He feels that her beauty must be a result of the arrangement of stars at the time of her birth, as he could never be a partial cause of anything so beautiful. Although he does not have a profession that allows for a special vocabulary, he affects the Latin terms for the names of common flowers. While the immediate laughter seeks to correct his faults, the laughter of second-thought realizes that he really believes these vanities and has settled the world according to his view of reality. The element of humiliation in the laughter at this comic character is, therefore, less strong.

In general, then, Fry's comic characters are not presented to achieve the laughter intended to correct through humiliation. This is a result of the tone of the various plays which seems to indicate that while the comic character is inadaptable to society, it may be society that needs to adapt. Although the comic characters are developed along the basic outlines of Bergson's study, they escape the general and in so

doing are untouched by malice, hysteria, or sarcasm.

## Chapter VIII

### Some Influences on the Comic Element in Christopher Fry

Any attempt to assign definitive trends of influence on the comic element in Christopher Fry finds the subject rich in suggestive possibilities. It has been observed that his plays echo elements from sources as diverse as the "Sermon on the Mount"<sup>1</sup> to Alice in Wonderland.<sup>2</sup> Because he writes in blank verse and because of the tone of his comedies, there is a strong tendency to draw comparisons between Fry and Shakespeare. In many ways "Fry is not like Shakespeare; although the young Shakespeare would not have disowned some of Fry's best pages."<sup>3</sup> His plays do contain "...the spirit that dances all through A Midsummer-Night's Dream and masquerades in As You Like It and haunts the lovely island of The Tempest. Quirks of chance, miracles of God, sudden bold conversions of character, daring but incredible deeds, that is what he likes to describe."<sup>4</sup> Doto, in A Phoenix Too Frequent, does encourage comparison with Juliet's nurse.<sup>5</sup> They both have the same earthiness and both have the same prosaic philosophy. When Juliet's nurse goes to carry a message to Romeo in Act II, scene iv, her conversation shows a love for long words, regardless of their correct meaning. Doto also has an interest in language. She says, "Oh, them owls. Those owls. It's woken her" (I.). When Tegeus swears by all the gods and the homes of the gods, naming a dozen classical references, Dynamene chides him not to labor to prove his secondary education, but Doto is duly impressed and praises, "How easy to sewar if you're properly educated./ Wasn't it pretty, madam? Pardon" (I.). Both Doto and the Nurse are able to

recognize love as something worth living for, hence the Nurse, knowing that Romeo is banished, does advise Juliet to consider marriage to Paris. Desdemona's Emily shares this practical approach to the matter of love. When Desdemona asks her if any woman would be untrue to her husband for all the world, Emily counters, "Why, would not you?" (V.i.). Desdemona swears, "No, by this heavenly light!" (V.i.). Emily says that she would not be untrue by the heavenly light, but she might by darkness. She goes on to reason that while she would not be untrue for a trifle, the whole world is another matter. Not only that, but she could make her husband monarch of the world, or store it for her own use. The views of these two faithful maids are reflected in the life that Doto claims as her own, the life she was ready to give up in order to learn more about.

There are echoes of Macbeth's porter in Cymen's Colgrin in Thor, With Angels. Both men, awakened from sleep, carry part of their dream world with them to answer the summons at the castle (farm) door. However, Fry continues to use blank verse form for his dialogue; whereas, Shakespeare employs prose for this more prosaic character.

Although there are those who maintain that Fry's "...whole manner is obviously based on the wit writing of the seventeenth century,..." (and represents) the first modern metaphysical comedy,"<sup>6</sup> this is not the intent of the author. Fry does not encourage such comparisons. He has indicated that the theater he conceives is not a recall of the earlier theater, "...as a sudden reversal to the Seventeenth Century, for example."<sup>7</sup>

The Duke in Venus Observed bears some resemblance to the heroes of William Congreve's comedies. The Duke lives in a world in which his actions are dictated by his appetites. He is unhampered by laws or conventions. He explains to Edgar that in regard to his selection of a

mother, "The case of Athene is minutely complicated/ By a husband.  
But don't be deflected. He would still/ Have the shooting over the  
estate" (I.). Congreve's heroes live in this same sort of world of  
unlimited licence, where appetite and fashion are the only laws.

The Duke has somewhat the same attitude toward women as Bellmour  
does in The Old Bachelor.<sup>8</sup> Bellmour's final estimate of his chosen love  
is that "...I think the woman's a woman, and that's all. As such I'm  
sure I shall like her, for the devil take me if I don't love all the  
sex" (I.i.). The Duke asks his son to select his mother from three  
candidates. The son questions if his father loves all three equally  
and the Duke replies, "...Just choose./ Shall I be happy on Tuesdays,  
Thursdays, and Saturdays,/ Or on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays?  
Some such difference/ Is all your choice involves" (I.). Bellmour gives  
his view of life as "Wisdon's nothing but a pretending to know and  
believe more than we really do. You read of but one wise man and all  
that he knew was that he knew nothing.... Leave business to idlers and  
wisdon to fools; they have need of 'em. Wit be my faculty and pleasure  
my occupation..." (I.i.). The Duke voices his view of his place in the  
world with the same sophisticated, self-interested attitude.

I'm a Roman in a world  
Of Romans, and all creation can recognize me  
As genus Man. Old men, young men, virgins,  
Viragoes, all walk hand in hand with me  
In the green enclosure of insensibility.  
An individual torment in Indo-China  
Makes less noise in your ear than the drop of a fir cone.  
So why do I have to be sensible  
Of a heart which is fortunate enough to be  
Four thousand miles nearer by way, someone,  
Moreover, to whom I've already given pleasure  
And the refuge of a bed, which I never gave  
(Such is my frailty) to the Indo-Chinee?  
Don't let's go mad with inconsistency.  
Either everything shall be near, or everything  
Shall be far.... (I.)

Derek Stanford has observed<sup>9</sup> that there are points of comparison between the Duke and another character in Congreve's play. He indicates that Silvia's deceit and rejection of Heartwell results in a picture of Heartwell as a defeated and ludicrous figure. Heartwell's last speech does carry a note of despair as a result of the "...rugged ways (that) attend the noon of life!" (V.ii.). Congreve's play concludes somewhat cynically that the fittest will survive. The Duke is one of these fittest although he, too, is concerned with the affects of age on love. But his true moral stature is shown only after his scheme to marry Perpetua miscarries. Out of rejection he achieves self-knowledge and maturity. He is able happily to marry Rosabel.

Critics have noted that Fry is like Shaw in poetry. The comparison is usually drawn with regard to their attitudes toward society. Thomas Mendip, in The Lady's not for Burning demanding "...fair play/ for the criminal classes!" (II.), is said to be an echo of Shaw. [Ben Ray Redman] When Perpetua and Dominic in Venus Observed discuss the possibility of their father being jailed, Perpetua remarks, "Poppadillo has the most beguiling/ Jackdaw look about him. But you think/ He wouldn't be happy in prison?" (II.i.). Shaw is again heard in verse form by one critic. [Walter Kerr] "...Fry has much of the impudent love of paradox, the passion for plain sense and the hopeful irony of his prose forebear.... Even when, in The Lady's not for Burning, he introduces two brothers who seem on the bumpkin side, they turn out to have the intellectual facility and emotional disillusionment of a couple of Shavian Caesars."<sup>10</sup>

One further comparison between the two authors may be noted in the creation of two heroines, Candida by Shaw and the Countess by Fry.

George Bernard Shaw<sup>11</sup> says that Candida has the ways of "...a woman who has found that she can always manage people by engaging their affection... but Candida's serene brown, courageous eyes, and well-set mouth and chin signify largeness of mind and dignity of character to ennoble her cunning in the affections" (I.). The Countess Rosmarin Ostenburg is described in the symbol of the butterfly in a quote from J. H. Fabre which Fry includes as a preface to the play, The Dark Is Light Enough. "The weather was stormy; the sky heavily clouded; the darkness...profound.... It was across this maze of leafage, and in absolute darkness, that...(she) had to find...(her) way in order to attain the end of the pilgrimage.

"Under such conditions the screech-owl would not dare to forsake its olive-trees...(She) goes forward without hesitation.... So well (she) directs (her) tortuous flight that, in spite of all the obstacles to be evaded, (she) arrives in a state of perfect freshness.... The darkness is light enough." Both Candida and the Countess partake of the quality of serenity.

Marchbanks' estimate of Candida, "A woman like that has divine insight: she loves our souls and not our follies and vanities and our illusions, or our collars and coats, or any other of the rags and tatters we are rolled up in..." (III.) is remarkably like Belmanns' description of the Countess, "...There are many names I could name/ Who would have been remarkably otherwise/ Except for her divine non-interference.... She has a touching way/ Of backing a man up against eternity/ Until he hardly has the nerve to remain mortal" (I.). The Countess resolutely maintains that no man is hers to give, carrying out the theme of the play which posits the dignity of the human being aside from any merit or lack of merit in an individual. She refuses to sacrifice Gettner to save

Peter, knowing that Gettner's need is greater. Candida, when forced to decide between Marchbanks and Morell, gives herself to Morell because his need is greater. The Countess says that on the question of love, free-will does not enter, "We're elected into love" (III.). Both Richard Gettner and Eugene Marchbanks are changed by their contact with the Countess and Candida. Candida says of Marchbanks, "He has learnt to live without happiness" (III.), and he leaves with a secret in his heart. Gettner, the perpetual coward, prepares to run from the soldiers after the death of the Countess, saying, "...You never showed/ Any expectations of me when you were alive,/ Why should you now?" (III.). But he does get the courage to stand and face the soldiers.

There are, then, instances of influence on the comic element in Christopher Fry from the playwrights of the past. There are, further, contemporary influences on the comic element in Fry. Chief among these is the French playwright, Jean Anouilh, whose comedy, L'Invitation au Chateau, was translated by Fry. Fry actually wrote one scene and part of another in this play,<sup>12</sup> which is titled, Ring Around the Moon in the English translation. Yet Fry's plays are peculiarly his own works, based on his own view of reality, presented in his own concept of language, and following his own central purpose.

In general, Fry's comic attitude may be analyzed in the light of Bergson's study of laughter. Over and above this, however, the recognition of the influence of Shakespeare, Congreve, and Shaw helps to further explain Fry's sense of the comic.

From Shakespeare the over all influence is a native, sometimes naive, realism coupled with a recurrent urge to express in verse something of that beauty which lies beyond reality. Like the comedy of



Shakespeare, Fry's comedy centers around his imaginative reaction to life itself. Both combine in their characters folly to make them laughable, simplicity to make them lovable. Both stop short of the laughter which is a result of that strain of cruelty which excludes all sympathy with its victim. The comic spirit of Fry, like that of Shakespeare, is inspired by a spirit of absolute humanity, unashamed and unafraid.

To Congreve, aside from the qualities already discussed in relation to Bergson (farce in its physical aspect, physical grotesqueness, external habit), Fry is chiefly indebted for his use of stichomythia between lovers or would be lovers. Shaw's influence is seen in the wry view of society which results in comedy which tends to attempt to direct laughter at the world instead of at the individual.

Finally, Fry's comic spirit is something that is entirely his own and is in a deeper sense independent of influence. This may be understood in a consideration of the use he makes of the comic element.

## Chapter IX

### The Use of Comedy by Christopher Fry

"...Progress is the growth of vision: the increased perception of what makes for life and what makes for death. I have tried...to find a way for comedy to say something of this, since comedy is an essential part of men's understanding."<sup>1</sup> This statement, included in a letter written by Christopher Fry to Robert Gittings, keynotes Fry's self-commission as a playwright.

In analyzing what Fry is able to say about what makes for life and what makes for death in his four comedies, it is noteworthy that his characters never fall into the trap where they present a cry of protest against both life and death. There is in Fry, "...something of an affable acquiescence to the prevailing pessimism of the Continental world view. He seems to take for granted that every intelligent person agrees that life is terrible and that to be a blithe optimist nowadays is to set oneself down as an idiot."<sup>2</sup>

Fry's four comedies were planned, he says, as a series reflecting each of the four seasons of the year.<sup>3</sup> Each of the four attempts to say something about the growth of vision; each growth of vision is based on love. The season of spring is represented by the play, A Phoenix Too Frequent.

In this play, Tegeus' reaction to the death watch is an emotional one. He is moved by the beauty of the love Dynamene has for her dead husband. Later, he is moved by her beauty. Then he is moved to say that if he were her dead husband he would not desire such a waste of

beauty on death. He explains that he was born in love with what he now meets. When he finds that he has lost one of the bodies he was supposed to guard, his reaction is again an emotional one. He declares that he will have to be hanged in place of the missing man. When Dynamene tells him his life is his own, his reply gives his vision of life. "At the best we live our lives on loan,/ At the worst in chains. And I was never born/ To have life. Then for what? To be had by it,/ And so are we all. But I'll make it what it is,/ By making it nothing" (I.).

Dynamene sets out on a death watch because her husband, the "hawser" (I.) of her world is dead. The image of her husband as the rope or cable used to moor her to the world, or to tow her through life, is repeated throughout the play. Without this cable, Dynamene drifts on the sea of life. Realizing the impossibility of such a life for her, she decides to follow her husband. This was not to be a death of pride, but of self-understanding. It was not to be an active taking of her life, but a letting go of it. Having found in Tegeus a love to give her a reason to live again, she realistically offers the dead-love to save the live-love. Her tribute to both lives shows that she understands the nature, the reality of life and death. "...I loved/ His life not his death. And now we can give his death/ The power of life. Not horrible: wonderful!/ Isn't it so? That I should be able to feel/ He moves in the world, accomplishing/ Our welfare? It's more than my grief could do" (I.).

The climatic mood of spring: rebirth and hope is part of this comedy. The analogy, if developed, discloses other comparisons to the process of growth. In this sense, a seed (Virilius) must be put into the earth (tomb) and must itself decay in order to give life to a new plant (the love of Dynamene and Tegeus); yet even in the new plant is the

same element of decay.

Realization of this paradox is displayed by Thomas Mendip in The Lady's not for Burning. This play is more concerned with an examination of the nature of life than with the dissection of the nature of death. Thomas has been compared to Hamlet.<sup>4</sup> He does indeed find the world a foul place. In the beginning of the play he says, "...I've never seen a world/ So festering with damnation" (I.). Even after he has given up the desire to be hanged, he looks at the sleeping town and sees, "There sleep hypocrisy, porcous pomposity, greed,/ Lust, vulgarity, cruelty, trickery, sham....I love you, (Jennet) but the world's not changed. Perhaps/ I could draw you up over my eyes for a time/ But the world sickens me still" (III.). In this statement is seen the growth from the spring of Tegeus to the summer of Thomas.

"There are three basic ways of facing life. One can love it and struggle with it--the creative way; one can loathe it and curse it--the destructive way; one can suffer and accommodate oneself to it--the civilized way."<sup>5</sup> The acquiescence of Thomas is neither blind nor naive. That he agrees to face the world because of his love for Jennet does not change his world as Tegeus' love for Dynamene changes his love. In the last speech in the play, Thomas says, "Then let me wish us both/ Good morning. --- And God have mercy on our souls" (III.). In this way, he greets life with the prayer for the dying.

It has been suggested that the Prometheus motif might be applied to the theme of The Lady's not for Burning.<sup>6</sup> However there seem to be more points of difference than of likeness. Basically, Thomas does not desire to save the world or mankind. He wants to escape. The position of mankind in Prometheus Bound as contemptuous because men are mortal,

ruled by necessity, and an object of pity, is relieved by only two redeeming features: compassion and fidelity. Mankind in Thomas Mendip's world is somewhat the same, with the important addition of the redeeming quality of human love.

Venus Observed is the play of autumn. The time setting is October. The Duke is middle aged, his fortune and estate show signs of decay. The house "...looks as though the walls have cried themselves to sleep for nights on end. And the number of windows/ Broken!" (I.). The Duke, even though he says that age is merely the accumulation of extensive childhood tries to cling to his youth. He says, "...I'll agree to immortality/ If immortality is to be always twenty-five/ Seen by a man approaching fifty" (I.iii.).

What this play says about life is that man, by his nature is never completely happy, never completely satisfied with his human relationships. There is, it seems, always something to be desired. The Duke longs for a lasting love. Reedbeck longs for the money and position of a peer. Edgar longs for the adroitness of his father. Dominic longs for a good family name. Although all these longings are in part satisfied, no one of these characters is completely happy. In this sense, the life of these people is not free from care, in spite of the fact that the external restrictions on the society in which they live are minimal. Perpetua seems to sum up the feeling of the play when she says, "I'm still remembering/ I can give pain, and that in itself is loss/ Of liberty" (III.).

The Dark Is Light Enough, subtitled, A Winter Comedy completes the series of climatic comedies. It has some of the gentle melancholy that Shakespeare attributed to a winter's tale, but serenity is more

descriptive of the tone of this play. It takes place during the winter of 1848-49. Following the progress from spring which considered re-birth through love, to summer which acquiesced to life because of love, to autumn which struggled and gave in to love, winter is also a story about life, death and love. The primary difference is that for the Countess, love in the sense of charity is absolute. She does not seek to change the world or mankind. She champions humanity, defending it without attempting to assess the merit of an individual example. She does not protest against life, neither does she protest against death. In fact, she sees death as giving meaning to life. When Jakob counsels her not to think about being parted from her friends by death, she replies,

But you've always thought of it, Jakob,  
 In the pleasure and conversation of these evenings.  
 The argument, philosophy, wit, and eloquence  
 Were all in the light of this end we come to.  
 Without it there would have been very little  
 To mention except the weather. Protect me  
 From a body without death. Such indignity  
 Would be outcast, like a rock in the sea.  
 But with death, it can hold  
 More than time gives it, or the earth shows it.  
 I can bear to think of this:  
 I can bear to be this, Jakob,  
 So long as it bears me. (III.)

Winter, then, apart from the exterior violence and a humanity that is substantially unchanged, brings the person of the Countess who has serenity. The finite quality of man gives perspective to his life.

These are the ideas that Christopher Fry seems to consider worth saying about progress as the growth of vision. Using the vehicle of comedy, which he feels is an essential part of men's understanding, these are the perceptions he presents about what he thinks makes for life and what he thinks makes for death.

## Chapter X

### Conclusion

The sense of the comic that is proposed by Henri Bergson in his essay "Laughter," and the sense of the comic that is presented by Christopher Fry in critical articles and speeches and applied by him in his verse drama does have a common basis. A consideration of the views of the comic in general held by Bergson and Fry reveals agreement regarding the nature and intent of comedy. Both men place comedy in the realm of the human. Fry does not follow Bergson's view of the comic which demands that laughter be dependent on an absence of feeling. By disregarding this requirement and by his insistence that even his comic characters contain the possibility of tragedy, Fry achieves a more mature sense of the comic than is outlined by Bergson. The use of laughter as a corrective is accepted by both writers; however, Bergson tends to turn corrective laughter against individuals who deviate from the social norm, and Fry turns corrective laughter at those norms of society which deviate from a proper perspective of man as man. Bergson's ideas are presented as a theoretical explanation of comedy; Fry's ideas exist in the realm of theory and practice.

The comic physiognomy which results from the control of the intellect and the will by habit as delineated by Bergson does not directly apply to the comedy of Fry. In using this facet of the comic, Fry transposes it to the level of language. He presents through defamatory rhetoric the distortion or paralysis of the weaker or stupider members of a group. While his plays contain evidence of the rigidity of character

that Bergson outlines, Fry does not indicate this by physical appearance.

That a really living life should never repeat itself explains for Bergson the comedy that results from a human being acting or moving as if he were powered by a machine. Fry seems to agree with this in principle. Although he does not include stage directions for movements, he creates situations involving characters whose movements could achieve this type of comedy. Yet Fry does not create characters who are wholly puppets. Intrinsic to his sense of the comic is the realization that man does have a spiritual essence from which proceeds actions of the intellect and will.

Any disguise, whether of man, society or nature, causes laughter for Bergson because, using the logic of the imagination, the disguise is momentarily mistaken for the essential being. Fry uses several of the techniques outlined by Bergson to achieve laughter. He portrays society caught up in the letter of the law, officialdom turned into a way of life, ceremonial viewed as an end instead of a means, the substitution of the human law for the natural law, and the focusing of attention on the physical side of man when the moral side should be considered. He does not picture the human being as a thing, except momentarily, and by implication.

Fry uses repetition, inversion and effects which are out of proportion to causes, to achieve the comedy of situation as described by Bergson. For the most part, the situations in Fry's plays are unconventional but their unconventionality is not exploited. Fry is more interested in what he calls the climate of his plays than he is in the situations he presents. The situations he describes are intended as a setting in which to present a clash between intelligences and the



reconciliation of this clash. The basic difference between Fry's and Bergson's views of the comic element in situations is Fry's refusal to create a life picture in which the mechanical has replaced the living.

The comic created by words in the plays of Fry can be analyzed in Bergson's terms. He does use the technique of expressing in a well established pattern an idea which is absurd; he also uses colloquial language to state the absurd. Fry also uses the following means described by Bergson to create the comic in words: a symbol in which the material side is extended, reversal of ideas or structure, word play, and the transposition of the natural expression of an idea into a different environment. Although Fry's comedy in words does meet the standards established by Bergson, his actual sense of the comic as created and expressed by his words cannot wholly be explained by Bergson's theories. Bergson's statement that any poet could create the comic in words by disregarding the emotion and stressing the intellect may also explain the quality of Fry's comedy in words that is not described by Bergson's other standards. For Fry's dramatic poetry combines intellect and emotion to the end of creating the comic in words which contains unity and variety.

The element of the comic in character as understood by Bergson is based on the failure of a man to adapt to the society in which he lives. It is displayed in automatism, absentmindedness, and rigidity and tends to produce a general type as opposed to a distinct individual. Automatism, absentmindedness and rigidity are found to some extent in comic characters created by Fry. In no single character, however, do these qualities so encompass the individual to such a degree as to destroy his individuality. While laughter is achieved and in certain instances

is intended to correct a vice or a rigid virtue, it is not intended to humiliate. Although his characters partake of the general, they are never completely typical.

By placing the comic element in the works of Christopher Fry in the perspective of the established critical study of comedy of Henri Bergson it has been noted that for the most part Fry's comedy can be explained in terms of Bergson's standards. However, the unique quality of Fry's comedy is best explained in terms of a single difference: Bergson denies emotion as a part of comedy, Fry combines emotion and intellect in his comedy.

That there may be some influences on the comic element in Fry from Shakespeare, Congreve and Shaw indicates that Fry is writing in view of the tradition of English drama. Yet he does not write the comedy of Shakespeare, Congreve or Shaw. His comedy is peculiarly his own. A study of these influences tends to enrich his comedy rather than to establish a single master.

Fry is a poet-dramatist writing comedy in order to say something about the increased perception of what makes for life and what makes for death. He has matured the tragic protest by viewing life as a moment in eternity.

## FOOTNOTES

### Chapter I.

<sup>1</sup>Christopher Fry, "Comedy," Adelphi, XXVII (Nov. 1950), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>Wylie Sypher, "Introduction," Comedy (New York, 1956), p. viii.

<sup>3</sup>Henri Bergson, "Laughter," Comedy (New York, 1956), p. 74.

<sup>4</sup>Christopher Fry, An Experience of Critics (New York, 1953), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>Bergson, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>Monroe K. Spears, "Christopher Fry and the Redemption of Joy," Poetry, LXXXVIII (April 1951), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Fry, "Poetry in the Theatre," Saturday Review of Literature, March 21, 1953, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup>Spears, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup>Derek Stanford, "Christopher Fry," The Contemporary Review, No. 1077 (Sept. 1955), p. 177.

<sup>10</sup>Spears, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup>Bergson, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>16</sup>"Enter Poet, Laughing" (anon. rev.), Time, LVI (Nov. 20, 1950), p. 63.

<sup>17</sup>Fry, "Poetry," p. 33.

<sup>18</sup>"Poet, Laughing," p. 61.

<sup>19</sup>Spears, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup>Fry, "Poetry," p. 18.

<sup>21</sup>Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry An Appreciation, 2nd ed. (New York, 1952), p. 89.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>23</sup>Walter Kerr, Pieces at Eight (New York, 1957), p. 143.

<sup>24</sup>The Lady's not for Burning, 2nd ed. (New York, 1950).

### Chapter II.

<sup>1</sup>Bergson, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>3</sup>Gilbert Highet, "The Poet and the Modern Stage: Christopher Fry," People Places and Books (New York, 1953), pp. 63-64.

<sup>4</sup>The Boy with a Cart, 2nd ed. (London, 1945).

<sup>5</sup>Stanford, "Appreciation," p. 162.

<sup>6</sup>Thor, With Angels (New York, 1951).

<sup>7</sup>Venus Observed (New York, 1950).

### Chapter III.

<sup>1</sup>Bergson, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>4</sup>A Phoenix Too Frequent (New York, 1951).

<sup>5</sup>Bergson, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup>The Dark Is Light Enough (New York, 1954).

#### Chapter IV.

<sup>1</sup>Bergson, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>9</sup>A Sleep of Prisoners (New York, 1952).

#### Chapter V.

<sup>1</sup>Bergson, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 104-110.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>10</sup>Charles Morgenstern, "Fantastical Banquet," Theatre Arts, XXXV (Jan. 1951), p. 29.

<sup>11</sup>Highet, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup>Morgenstern, p. 29.

#### Chapter VI.

<sup>1</sup>Bergson, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 137-138.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>5</sup>Morgenstern, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>Frederick Lumley, Trends in 20th Century Drama A Survey since Ibsen and Shaw (London, 1956), p. 198.

<sup>7</sup>George Jean Nathan, The Theatre Book of the Year A Record and an Interpretation 1950-1951 (New York, 1951), p. 92.

<sup>8</sup>Highet, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup>The Firstborn (New York, 1952).

<sup>10</sup>Morgenstern, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup>Nathan, p. 92.

#### Chapter VII

<sup>1</sup>"Poet, Laughing," p. 59.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>3</sup>William Arrowsmith, "English Verse Drama: Christopher Fry," The Hudson Review, III (Summer 1950), p. 214.

## Chapter VIII

<sup>1</sup>Bonamy Dobree, "Some London Plays," The Sewanee Review, LXIII (Spring 1955), p. 280.

<sup>2</sup>Higbet, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>5</sup>Citations from Shakespeare are to Shakespeare Major Plays and the Sonnets, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York, 1948).

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, "Review of A Phoenix Too Frequent," The Nation, CLXX (May 13, 1950), p. 457.

<sup>7</sup>Morgenstern, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup>Citations from Congreve are to The Works of Congreve, ed. F. W. Bateson (New York, 1930).

<sup>9</sup>Stanford, "Contemporary Review," p. 177.

<sup>10</sup>Kerr, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup>Citations from Shaw are to A Treasury of the Theatre Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller, ed. John Gassner (New York, 1951).

<sup>12</sup>Stanford, "Appreciation," p. 140.

## Chapter IX.

<sup>1</sup>"Preface," A Sleep of Prisoners (New York, 1952).

<sup>2</sup>Harold Clurman, "Theatre: In Contrast to Fry," New Republic, CXXV (Aug. 20, 1951), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>Stanford, "Appreciation," p. 57.

<sup>4</sup>"Poet, Laughing," p. 60.

<sup>5</sup>Harold Clurman, "Theatre: Two Ladies," New Republic, CXXIII (Nov. 27, 1950), p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Stanford, "Contemporary Review," p. 177.

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